

The Unexpected Discovery at Clarity Christian University by mudezami

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Adventure, Mystery

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-04-20 14:11:26

Updated: 2017-04-20 14:11:26

Packaged: 2019-12-17 15:21:01

Rating: K+

Chapters: 5

Words: 8,083

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: It's spring, 1985, and the Wheeler family is taking off with Mike's friends for Spring Break while Nancy visits CCU for an overnight tour. El is stranded in the Upside Down but has figured out a way to hear the others and tries to stay as close as possible. Marilyn, Beth and Rosie are students at CCU who, after a student goes missing, honestly didn't ask for any of this.

1. Sleeping Over

Hi Everyone! SO I'm pretty new to the Stranger Things fandom and have thus brought about THIS abomination! :) So basically, not going off the season two teasers, it's about El's return, but it includes some of my own characters and a new situation. A lot of this is based off of personal experience, and Clarity Christian University is fictional, as far as I know, and based off of my own college experiences. There's a lot of nerdy band stuff happening as well, as you'll see, but that's because as a Music Ed person that's all I know.

Clarity Christian, although having Christian in the name and having some reference to Catholicism and Christian teachings, is not meant to preach any form of religion or assert that any religion is the morally right one. It just happens to be what I came up with. Thanks for understanding.

I don't know a lot about the 80s, but I do check to make sure if I use something (like iHOP for example) that it was a thing before or during the 80s. Let me know if I slip up and accidentally added weird time travel things. Thanks!

Also small announcement: I have no idea how often I'll be able to keep up with this fic. Its the last month of the semester so I might literally go insane from stressing out and studying. Also, I'm in a drum corps so I definitely won't be able to keep up with this over the summer. Sorry in advance!

Love all y'all

-Mudezami

Eleven

It was hard to keep time, as she had no real sense of it in practice, but El knew one thing: She had been in the Upside Down for a long time. It was a cold, dark, and unforgiving abyss. She had stayed near Hawkins, wandering the empty school, the empty streets, and always returning to her fort in Mike's basement. She could tell he was there,

because sometimes she could hear his voice through faint static in the not-quite-functional electronics of the Upside Down.

Every night for what seemed like ages, she could hear faint sobs before they were soothed by gentle whispers from Nancy. Occasionally she could hear the clamoring static of the boys playing board games and Dnd. She knew there were ways to contact them, but she didn't know if she'd ever be able to truly return. Staying in Hawkins was agony, as every empty turn was just a reminder of what she lost. Hearing and seeing the boys brought her happiness, but knowing she could never fully join them brought her only more agony. She wanted to leave, but she didn't know what she would do, or where she would go.

Sometimes, she could see Will. His voice was always much louder than the others, and sometimes his voice would fade slowly until it popped up an awful volume, until it was as though it was amplified in her ear. It was less of him talking, and more breathing, screaming, or crying. At first it had startled El, but then she found out why: Will could see into the Upside Down.

It happened one night after El had returned with a new stash of Leggos from the forest. Just as she began to walk downstairs, she passed the bathroom only to find Will standing, gripping the counter and staring into the mirror, repeating to himself, "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm safe, I'm safe...." El dropped her bag of eggos and nearly tripped. If Will saw her, he didn't notice, and just as soon as he was there, he vanished.

El didn't know why Will could see into the Upside Down, but it was clear he couldn't control it, and it affected him in the worst way. She tried to avoid him when he was doing so.

Once all the voices died away at night, Mike's presence stayed down in the basement. El hoped he wouldn't cry again, because it tortured her. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't leave, and if she could, she didn't know how. She was all alone. She wanted to reach out to him, but she didn't want to at the same time. She didn't want to give him false hope. Guilt ate away at her, because she knew she was being a bad friend. Was being silent the same as being a liar?

"Eleven?"

The voice had come from the old, tarnished walkie talkie laying on the floor.

"Are you there, El? Can you hear me? Over."

El slowly picked up the walky and held it up level with her face.

"I know you're out there. I don't think your dead. I can't."

She froze. She didn't know enough words to articulate how she felt. Mike had paused there, not saying over, nor continuing to speak. She began to speak into the walky.

"Friends don't lie," she began, "I'm alive."

Mike

He was alone in his basement, and the rest of his friends had gone upstairs to get ready for bed. He told them he was going to put away the DnD game and catch up with them. They were sleeping over, and tomorrow everyone was going to pile into Mom and Dad's cars and go up north for Spring Vacation. Nancy was going on an overnight tour at Clarity Christian University, and Dad decided this was a perfect opportunity to take the boys out for a group vacation. He had droned on and on about fishing at the lake. Of course, everyone, except maybe Mom, was totally on board with the idea. Nancy couldn't care less. The whole family, and the boys, were going on the basic tour with her, but while she stayed at the dorms on campus, everyone else was going to stay at a nearby hotel.

After he was done cleaning up, Mike sat down at the table and couldn't help but stare at the blanket fort, where El had lived for that eventful week three years ago. He never totally took it down, and would sometimes creep down to the basement and lay there when he couldn't fall asleep.

That's right, it had been three years. The boys, Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Mike, were finishing their eighth grade year. They were going to be freshmen in High School next year. They had been through so much, and continued to explore junior high, closer than ever. They of

course moved on a little, they made new friends. Max, the boyish ginger who moved to Hawkins in seventh grade, had become a new staple in their friend group. Mike had to admit she was no El, but she brought with her her own brand of adventure. Sometimes she played DnD but she had less freedom and free time as the rest of the boys.

Mike picked up the walky talky in vain, while no one was around to hear.

"Eleven?" He said. There was no response.

"Are you there, El? Can you hear me?"

Silence.

Mike felt himself break down, if only a little. It had been years, but occasionally he still thought about her. She had shown up so suddenly and disappeared so quickly. He couldn't forget her, and he didn't know what happened to her. He kept a small flame of hope inside of him that she could still be alive, maybe in the Upside Down. This is the only way he could fathom how to communicate with her.

"I know you're out there. I don't think you're dead. I can't..." *Think you're dead. You can't be dead.* He choked up a little, and felt incredibly stupid. He doesn't want her to be dead, but he also doubted that he was talking to anybody.

In that moment, Mike thought he heard something from the walky talky. He can't be certain, but it might have been a small spark of static. For that moment, he thought he could hear a very faint "alive."

"El?" He asked, right before he heard footsteps clamber down the stairs. He shoved the walky behind him so that it was wedged between the chair and his back, out of sight. He felt he was so close to being caught, and felt stupider than ever. It had to have been his imagination. It was just a small glitch in the walky talky, just a small bit of static. Sometimes when you're desperate, you imagine things.

Dustin appeared in the doorway.

"Hey Mike what's the name of the hotel we're staying at? I'm tryna win a bet – what are you doing?"

"Nothing," Mike said, hoping Dustin would drop the subject. "The hotel's called the Courtyard at Tippecanoe."

Dustin cursed at himself. "I owe Lucas five dollars." He glanced around the room, and said quieter, eyes wide, "I don't have five dollars."

"Dustin! Mike!" Nancy yelled down the stairs. Dustin turned abruptly up towards her.

"Mom says you guys need to go to bed by 11. We have to leave early if we want to get to CCU by 8."

"Aw, why does it matter?" Dustin yelled up at her.

"Because we need to actually get there, you know, in time for the tour."

"We can sleep in the car," Mike interjected.

"Don't shoot the messenger, I'm just saying what Mom told me," Nancy sighed, finally stalking off.

Dustin sighed and ran back upstairs. As soon as he was out of sight, Mike pulled the walky from behind his back and placed it on the table and slowly got up to join the others up stairs.

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Eleven

El stared at the walky in her hands. She didn't know what happened, or if Mike could hear her, but she had heard the whole thing. The Wheelers were going somewhere. El didn't know where, but she knew she couldn't bear to be entirely alone. If she wanted to retain some level of sanity, she had to follow them.

2. Technical Difficulties

Hey all! I technically already had this chapter written when I uploaded the first one, so just saying don't expect for me to upload chapters this quickly :)

Salavibes: Oh my goodness thank you so much! I used to write fanfiction a lot more and I hadn't lately, and I mostly had been writing like school papers so I'm glad you think I write well!

So here's when I start introducing my new characters. There isn't much to them right now but hopefully it gets better.

Love all ya'll,

-mudezami

Marilyn

It was spring time at Clarity Chrisitan University, which meant the bumbling over-caffeinated students could peel off one top layer off of the several other sweaters they still had to wear. Things were looking greener but still seemed to be covered in a slight fog of stuffy death.

Honestly, the students weren't doing much better, because research papers and midterm projects were in full swing.

There was an early morning Clarity Collegiate Band rehearsal, because the concert was next week. Marilyn honestly thought there was no reason to hold an extra rehearsal, because they sounded amazing. But Collegiate Band is supposed to be the bottom rung of the bands: it had no formal audition and was open to students trying to learn new instruments. The grad students and instructor were nervous because it was unnerving that the band was so good this year. They had to make sure it was perfect, and that the ensemble this year wasn't a fluke or a weird dream.

And percussionists, well, they had to get there early to set up.

That's why Marilyn was sitting outside the music hall with her oversized black jacket and her auburn hair half brushed and in a

ponytail, waiting for someone to open the building. Rosie wasn't awake when she ran by her room and knocked on the door. Beth had to wake her up, and told Marilyn to go ahead without her and that she'll be there soon.

Martha, the lead percussionist, didn't seem to be there yet. And if she was, she forgot to unlock the doors.

Marilyn laid back against the walls, watching as the sun rose higher in the sky. It had to only be about 7:30 am. *Why did rehearsal have to be so early?*

The answer of course was the exact reason loads of other students, the student government, the clarity ambassadors, and several social sororities, were bustling about at this ungodly hour, setting up balloons, decorations and signs that say "*Welcome to Clarity! Discovery Students*" with giant red arrows pointing down certain paths of the campus. Tours weren't uncommon on campus, and there usually happened to be a couple throughout the week for highschoolers trying to get a feel for colleges. However, this weekend was the BIG tour. It was the beginning spring break for almost everyone. And this tour was for people looking to get more than just a feel for Clarity, it was like a camping experience. They had so many activities planned, counseling sessions, skits and games, and the kids got to stay overnight in some of the emptier dorms.

It was too busy to have the rehearsal any later, or the place would be too crowded.

"Sorry I'm late! I got stuck in traffic!" a tall figure in a bright white letter sweater and sweatpants yelled as they approached Marilyn from the parking lot, searching her pocket for the hall keys. "Where's Rosie?" Martha asked.

"She's coming, she's – "

"RIGHT HERE!" Rosie yelled from across the street as she hastily speed-walked towards them, breathing heavily. "I'm – ugh – right here, I'm not late, I'm right on time I swear – "

"It's fine," Martha dismissed, opening the doors and letting them in.

"Start pushing all the mallet instruments to HL," She said, referring to the Higgins-Lawrence Auditorium. "Except for the vibraphone."

"Gotcha, chief," Marilyn said.

"Rosie you can get the auxiliary stuff out of 189..." Rosie nodded, tying up her thick dark hair in a bun and pushing her sunglasses on the top of her head. She was much shorter than both Martha and Marilyn.

Slowly the rest of the percussionists showed up and as they moved all of the equipment through the hall, the rest of the band began to show up for 8:00 am call time, which meant they got in the way. Soon everything was set up and the percussionists sat in the back of the stage while the winds warmed up. Soon one of the grad students quieted everyone for announcements.

"Alright everyone, we're going to be rehearsing in concert order, does everyone remember what that is?" Everyone mumbled in agreement.

"Ok. So as you know, the CCU Discovery Tours are going on, and I've granted them permission to quietly allow groups walk through the auditorium to hear us rehearse. This is a good opportunity to recruit students as well as make sure you all have *proper rehearsal etiquette*, so please no extra talking and no funny business. Got it?"

"Yes Scott." The collective ensemble droned.

"Wonderful! Let's do a B flat scale to warm up..."

By the end of the rehearsal, the director and the grad students were once again assured that the 1985 Clarity Collegiate Band was, once again, not a fluke. They were in the middle of finishing the last piece, *Irish Tune from County Derry*. The piece itself was rather slow, and although it was beautiful to hear, there were practically no percussion parts except for an eight measure cymbal roll Marilyn happened to play in the middle of the piece. The band began to play the unison part, which was her cue to walk up to the cymbal and prepare to play. In the audience she saw a small tour group watching in the very back. Just as she began to prep her mallets, the lights suddenly all went out. Some people continued to play, but most of

the ensemble stopped in confusion. Startled yells and laughing could be heard echoing from the back of the auditorium.

"Alright, alright, don't panic," Scott called from the side of the stage. "Andrew can you go find the power switch? Maybe someone accidentally turned it off? A janitor?"

"Yeah," called the other grad student as he stumbled away through the darkness. The ensemble whispered among themselves in amusement.

"This is like that one time a dog ran onto the field during Marching rehearsal," Rosie commented. "Except less cute, I guess."

"I wouldn't rather have puppies on stage," Marilyn agreed.

"Ok so I tried the lights and nothings working so I think the power just went out," Andrew called.

"Ok well, sorry about that folks, I know we can't really play if we can't see our music," Scott said. "We're going to have to wait until-"

Suddenly the lights came back on, much brighter than before, or so it seemed. Many kids in the band groaned, their eyes shocked from the sudden light.

"Oh, well, wonderful," Scott continued. Except the lights flashed back out once more, then came back on, buzzing. One of the kids in the back of the room started coughing really loudly. Many students turned and looked at him as he ran out the exit, and another kid followed him.

"They look a little young to be going to college," Martha scoffed from the back of the stage.

"Maybe they're family?" Guessed Rosie.

"Or child prodigies," added Marilyn.

"Not all of them, there's too many."

"Please cut the chatter!" Scott hollered from the front, "I know we're

having some... technical difficulties, but it's nothing we can't get through. Besides, we only have one more piece, then we can all get out of here. You guys sound *really good*, by the way. The trumpets are a little flat though. From the unison!"

He counted them back in and Marilyn prepped to play the cymbal roll. As soon as the song was over, all the percussionists immediately jumped up to load everything out.

Once everything was put away, Justin approached Rosie, Beth and Marilyn, who were deciding where to go for breakfast. Justin was also wearing a letter sweater, much like Martha's. He was a tall, big dude with a ginger beard. He held up his camera to try to get a picture of them while offguard. Marilyn noticed and ducked behind Rosie right away. "No fair," he said.

"You know I hate pictures, Justin."

"I know. That's why I take them," he said, holding up his camera next to him and haphazardly taking a picture without looking. It was probably blurry and looked awful.

"Anyway, a bunch of TMP people are going to the iHop down the street for brunch. Wanna come? We can walk, I can pay." TMP was a pseudo greek group on campus. It stood for The Music People, but was also officially known as Theta Mu Pi. It wasn't really greek, and it was a co-ed club. That didn't stop people from making the traditional greek letters and wearing them proudly. It functioned as the service and social group for music kids: band, orchestra, jazz, choir... all kinds.

Rosie, Beth and Marilyn had "rushed" TMP last semester and were new actives. IHop happened to be Justin's favorite place to go, and they had gone a few times already.

"Who else is going?" Beth asked, picking up her saxophone case.

"Oh, you know, Martha, Del, David, the other David," Justin recited.

"What does that matter?" Rosie interjected at Beth. "Food is food. Let's go."

3. Flickering Lights

Here's chapter 3! Since I haven't made it totally clear what's happening, it would be cool if anyone tried to guess in the reviews, you know, if you care enough. It's chill if not though. Just, what do you think is happening?

Love Y'all,

mudezami

Will

The lights went out while the tour group had walked through the auditorium. No big deal right? It happens. But when they came back on, Will started to feel nauseus. He knew he was going to have a coughing fit, and he was afraid he was going to go back to the Upside Down. *Why now*, he thought.

Then the lights began to flicker on and off, and the boys glanced at each other with a shared sense of Déjà vu. That's when Will felt it, and started coughing. The band ensemble they had been briefly observing began to look at him. It was too much, so he pushed Lucas out of the way and ran out the doors.

"Will!" Karen called after him.

"I'll check up on him," Mike assured his mom.

Will looked around in panic, trying to hold back his coughs. He saw a nearby classroom, empty, and hoped the doors were unlocked.

They were.

He let himself in and found the nearest trashcan and hunched over right before the slug forced its way out of his mouth. He saw Will at the door, hesitant to follow after him. And then he was gone, and the classroom flickered into disarray. Black slime oozed down the walls and grey ash fell around him. Will hugged himself to fight the sudden cold, and tried to stay calm. He thought he heard banging somewhere, like loud footsteps or someone using a hammer, but

knew it was probably nothing. The demagorgon was gone, there weren't any monsters to hide from.

Suddenly Mike was in front of him, holding his shoulders. The classroom was normal again, and Will was hyperventilating.

"Are you ok?" Mike said, steadying him.

"Yeah..." Will said, unfocused.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just, sick, you know. The Upside Down... it messes with you."

"It's ok buddy, it's over." Mike assured him. "Are you sure you're ok for now?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

There was knocking at the door and both boys started, turning quickly. An adult opened the door and said, "Hey kids, you're not allowed in here. Where's your parents?"

"They're in the auditorium. We were just going back," Mike said, holding his chest from surprise.

The two kids went back to the auditorium, where the lights were finally stable, and the ensemble had begun stacking chairs and leaving the stage.

"You missed it," Nancy muttered. "It was a good song."

"Song?" Lucas asked. "What were the lyrics?"

"Shut up you know what I meant," Nancy retorted.

"And now we're going to have small break for food. Please meet back at the Union by 1:00 pm. And if any of you are interested in the music program, please talk to me and I can let you know how to proceed for auditions and ensembles..." the student tour guide said.

"Hey kids," Mikes dad began, "we passed a couple of joints by the

hotel. How about we get lunch there?"

"Heck yeah!" Dustin said.

"Anywhere's good, I'm starving," Will said, a bit shakily.

"Ok well, there's a breakfast place down the street I thought," Mike's mom suggested.

"Oh yeah, iHop?" Dustin said, excitedly. "I've heard of it! There isn't one in Hawkins."

"That's the place," Karen said. "Sound good, Nancy?"

Nancy shrugged. "Yeah, ok. I don't care."

Eleven

She tried following them, but it ended up being too hard. They moved much too quickly, it was a doomed mission from the start. She tried to use her powers to move the Upside Down version of their car, but it took too much effort and didn't move that fast. She only got a few miles outside of Hawkins before their voices faded away.

Frustrated, El stopped in the middle of the road. She wasn't too far from Hawkins, and she could easily just turn back and wait.

But she kept walking in the same direction. She could do anything here, really. She probably had an eternity to do whatever she wanted, and she could always come back to Hawkins.

As she continued to walk north, she began to hear... something else. Like Will, it was louder, as though it was in the Upside Down. But it wasn't the boys.

It was banging. Stomps, clinks, and it was getting louder as she walked north.

Curious, she redirected her destination. She ended up going off the driving road, rundown as it is, and made a diagonal path, trying to follow the noise.

She had no idea what it could be. Could it be another monster? Another demagorgon?

If it was, she wanted to find out. See if she could destroy that too. She would rather sacrifice herself than let it get back to the real world somehow.

She wouldn't let it get to Mike and the others. She wouldn't let it get to Will. She would rather die.

Of course, she really, really didn't want to.

Marilyn

Justin walked slightly ahead of them as they made their way down the road. The traffic was busier than normal because of the tours and the larger amount of cars than normal made her slightly anxious.

"Remember that one time Matthew pushed you into the road?" Beth asked. Matthew was Marilyn's twin brother. His hair was darker and he was much taller, and looked a lot more like their mom. He studied education at CCU. Sometimes he hung out with Marilyn and her friends, but not often.

"You're not helping," Marilyn replied, eyeing the road.

"But that time you just laid there!"

"There weren't any oncoming cars."

"That's true. You're right." Beth gave up.

"Yeah honestly I can't wait until tours are over. It kind of ruins Spring Break," Justin commented. "I mean, at least it's just the weekend."

They walked for a little bit, tired. They talked about school and band things, like any group of band geeks might.

"Oh and by the way, Michael can't make the concert," Beth said. "He has a midterm that day and can't really leave." Michael was Beth's boyfriend, but he lived in Indianapolis. He goes to a larger university and is studying composition. He comes up relatively frequently, like

every other weekend. Sometimes they might call him in the lobby of their dorm, when receptions good and they have the money.

"You know, I've never actually met Michael. Does he actually exist?" Justin asked.

"Of course he does, why wouldn't he?" Beth huffed. They were finally leaving the outskirts of campus, and passed the old Chemistry building. Technically only half the building was in use because a new lab building was built a few years back, and often other clubs and organizations will meet there. It looked like someone was meeting at the moment, oddly enough, but no one noticed that until they saw the light flickering on the third story.

"Wow, there really must be something up with the power here," Rosie sighed. "Guess we can't call Michael tonight."

"All evidence points to the fact that he *doesn't exist*." Justin repeated.

"He *exists*. You're being *so dumb right now*."

Suddenly a loud banging could be heard from the building. "What is *going on* up there?!" Rosie asked.

"Probably construction. Who knows what goes on in that building," Marilyn mused. It sounded to her like they were building something, maybe fixing a wall or building a sculpture. "Or welding?"

"Welding." Rosie repeated.

"I don't know, Rosie," Marilyn said defensively.

Justin took out his camera from his backpack and began to take pictures of the window.

"That's a little weird, Justin," Beth told him. He shrugged, "We're working on contrast."

"It's day time."

"So?"

"The suns out."

"I'll take what I can get," he said matter-of-factly. "It's not the only picture I'll take."

"You're so strange." Rosie concluded.

"Not as strange as you," Justin muttered under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, putting his camera back in his bag. "Let's go."

4. Downside Up

Nancy

Nancy had to admit that she really liked the small community and small campus that this college had to offer. But honestly the only reason she was here was because of spring break and because it was so close. She knew Clarity Christian was a good school... but she really had her sights set somewhere higher. Out of state, and Ivy League school. Harvard, at best.

She tried her best not to meddle with whatever was going on with Will, and the best she could do to help was prevent her parents from noticing too much. They didn't fully understand what happened to him, and they probably never will, but they can understand at least that he might have some permanent negative health from... whatever they think happened.

She was worried about him, sure, but she had to try to help everything go back to normal. Of course it could never be totally normal, but that's besides the point. She held on to the hope that Will's sickness would eventually disappear, and that Mike would be himself more. Ever since El went missing, it just seemed that he would be distant sometimes. Having a crush is one thing, but just finding someone in general and having them just disappear like that, in the way she did... it was heavy.

Her parents drove them all down to the iHop. For a place down the street, it really took a long time to get there. The tours aren't that large, but they're sure large for this college town. There isn't enough street to hold all these people, let alone their cars.

iHop was crowded. Nancy recognized a few people from her tour group, and she would glance over and smile politely. She didn't really know them to hold conversation.

"I can't believe you're getting the smiley face pancakes. What are you, five?" Lucas scoffed at Dustin.

"On the inside, man, on the inside," Dustin replied cheerfully.

"Besides, Mrs. Wheeler said we could get whatever we wanted. And they're cheap."

"It's iHop, everything's cheap," Lucas said.

"It all adds up," Karen said from the other booth. There wasn't enough space to hold all of them comfortably, at least in any available booths, so the servers offered two newly cleaned booths back to back. The adults and Nancy sat in one, and the rest of the kids sat in another. But she didn't have much to talk about with her parents except for the boring college stuff, so turned around to join the conversation over the booth chair.

"Yeah, that's why I'm just getting water," Will explained. "Water's free here, right?"

"It should be," Mike agreed.

Nancy excused herself from the adult table and pulled up a chair to join the kids.

"What's up, Nancy?" Will said in greeting.

"Nothing much, just getting the *college* experience," she said. She pulled in closer towards Will. "Are you ok?"

He glanced around at the others before saying nervously, "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" Nancy slid off her chair and moved into the booth next to Will.

"Well, you don't seem to be getting better, you know. Maybe you should consider going back to the hospital when we get back –"

"No," Will said quickly. "No, I'm fine, trust me, it's getting better." The lights flickered in and out for a moment, and everyone looked up at the lights.

"Excuse me, can we use this chair?" A thin girl, clearly in college, with wavy light brown hair asked. Nancy nodded and waved at the chair, and she smiled and quickly lifted it away towards a table.

Will turned back to Nancy after the girl had walked away, "I swear."

"Ok, I'm just worried about you."

Will smiled at her. "Thanks."

"What do you think of Clarity, Nancy? It seems like a pretty cool place," Dustin asked, trying to return the conversation to normalcy.

As they talked about the tour, the waiter brought over their waters. She turned around to give some drinks to the other table, with the brown haired girl. She seemed to be with other girls her age and a much larger, ginger guy. It looked like she had a case of some sort under the table. Nancy quickly looked away, not wanting to be thought of as weird.

"I liked the band, you know," Nancy continued. "The music was really nice. Especially the last song – uhm, *piece*. I wish I still played flute."

"You can play flute? That's cool," Lucas said, taking a sip of his water. "I mean, I tried playing drums once. I thought it was really cool. Turns out I sucked I quit and did church choir instead."

"I remember that," Will laughed. "Only lasted about a month till you quit."

"I never got into band, you know. I always like singing, too," Dustin added.

"No way dude," Mike said in awe.

"Yeah way, give me a base note."

Mike glanced at Will, clearly not willing to sing at all in public. Will rolled his eyes and started ah-ing a note.

Lucas jumped on the chance and harmonized another note above, looking at Dustin expectingly. Dustin grinned and sang a clear pitch on top of that. Will broke his pitch and started laughing, making everyone else stop too.

"Wow, Dustin, I never knew," Nancy laughed.

"Hey, that was really cool," called one of the girls from the next table

over. It wasn't the brown haired girl, instead it was a taller girl with auburn hair and heavy framed glasses. Nancy recognized her from the band ensemble, standing up in the back with the shorter girl with black hair. "You guys all sing?"

"Uh, no just Lucas and him," Mike shrugged.

"How old are you guys?" She asked.

"We're gonna be freshman," Dustin said. The auburn haired girl nudged the black haired girl. "In College?" The black haired girl asked, clearly shocked.

"No, high school," Mike explained. "She's gonna be in college though," he said, gesturing at Nancy.

"Oh." Short girl said.

"Play any instruments?" Wavy brown hair girl asked.

"She used to play the flute!" Dustin said excitedly. Nancy kicked his leg under the table. "OW!"

"A long time ago. I haven't played in years," Nancy explained quickly.

"That's too bad," she said. "Well, it's a small college so we might see you around. I'm Beth."

"And I'm Marilyn, or Mary," auburn hair said. "This is Rosie," she said, gesturing to the shorter one, who waved. "And that's Justin. We're part of Theta Mu Pi. It's like a music club."

"That's cool," Nancy said politely. "Nice to meet you. But like I said, I'm not really into music anymore. But, I mean, you sounded really nice earlier. We heard you rehearsing."

"Thanks!" Beth said.

"I mean, if you ever change your mind, we'll be here," Justin added. Marilyn punched him in the shoulder, "don't be pushy."

The conversation seemed to end there, so Nancy turned back to the

boys and they continued talking amongst themselves.

El

She got there quicker than she thought. Maybe the Upside Down wasn't as physical as she thought, either. She was walking through plains and marshlands until she saw a road, and across it a large brick building. The banging was deafening, and definitely coming from inside. Lights were violently flickering in all of the windows of the third floor. She walked closer, and stopped, pale.

She saw a moving shadow in one of the rooms.

Unsure, she found a door and opened it, entering the building. It reminded her of the lab where she grew up with Papa.

Bad.

This wasn't the same place, and Papa was gone. Dead. The demagorgon got him.

But there was another one.

She looked through all the doors until she found one with stairs, and made her way up to the third floor. Down the hall way, the lights flickered quickly, making electric buzzing noises all through the floor. She couldn't hear any growling, like the demagorgon from Hawkins. She walked down the hall, looking through the rooms.

"Hey!" She heard from behind. Startled she turned around quickly and snapped his leg. It was a man. As old as Nancy, maybe, or older. He collapsed, holding his leg. Panicked, El ran behind her and into the other room. The lights went out, and the banging seemed to stop. There didn't seem to be a way out... except the window... she could survive the jump...

She didn't even notice that the window was red, in stark contrast with the rest of the world. She noticed, but it didn't register. She also didn't notice that there was no window pane. She desperately tried to escape, confused about the situation, and what she had just done. As soon as she climbed through and let go, she hit the ground immediately.

She looked around, and she wasn't outside, on the ground.

She was back in the room. It was bright, there were lights, and there were two other men looking at her in shock.

"Where's Anthony?" One asked after a pause, eyes wide. El stared at him, not knowing what he was asking her. She looked at the other man.

"The portal's... closed," he breathed, staring at the window behind her. He took a step forward. Startled, she got up and dashed past him out the door. The men turned around in an attempt to run after her, but she slammed the doors with her mind, locking them in. They tried to open the doors to no avail. The one who asked her about Anthony started banging on the window. She took a few steps back, shaking her head.

"Please!"

"*Bad*," she whispered, but they couldn't hear her.

She ran down the hall, down the stairs, and out onto the road.

5. Fruit Gushers

Rosie

"Guys, trust me, you tip twenty percent," Marilyn assured the group, as they all bickered among themselves. It was actually starting to get quiet at iHop, because all of the tour groups were gone by 12:30. And here they were, arguing over how much to tip.

"My mom told me fifteen. I've been doing it ever since," Rosie explained. Justin rolled his eyes.

"Rosie, I work in food service. It's twenty. You lower the percent if you feel they don't deserve it because bad service."

"No, that can't be right, I always just don't tip if there's bad service," Beth said.

"And that makes you an awful customer."

"It doesn't matter, I think the waiter didn't do anything wrong..." Marilyn tried.

"Listen, ok, whatever, I'm the one paying, so I'm in charge of the tip. I'm tipping twenty percent. Ok?" Justin finally said. Everyone shut up after that. Justin took out his change and left it on the table.

"Are we ready to go?" He added. Everyone nodded, slightly irritated. They got up from the table and left the restaurant, stepping out into the breezy, cold Indiana weather.

It had gotten cloudier since that morning, and it looked like it could rain later.

"I hope it snows," Marilyn sighed.

"I don't," snorted Rosie. "I just want it to be warm already. Like Spring is supposed to be."

"And I want to get a tattoo of Carrie Fischer's face on my arm, but that's not gonna happen," Justin said.

There was a slight pause before Rosie said, "I mean, I don't see why you can't?"

"Oh my *God* don't encourage him!" shouted Beth. "What if he actually does?"

"So what if I actually do?"

Midlaugh, Rosie looked towards the woods as she shook her hair from off her shoulder. In that instant, she thought she saw movement or shadows, moving behind the bushes. She stopped.

"What's up?" Marilyn asked. Rosie stared for a little at the area she saw movement, but nothing else stirred.

"Nothing, I..." She narrowed her eyes, trying to focus. What did she think she saw? Possibly a dog, or a wild animal? Something snapped a little bit behind them, and there was an audible *thud*. Rosie took off, walking into the brush.

"Rosie?" Beth called after her.

"I think there's a dog or something," she mumbled, hardly so that the others could hear her.

"What?" Beth asked, trailing behind her.

Rosie walked towards where she thought she heard the *thud*, and reached the area behind a short, wide shrub where she saw a leg scoot behind another tree.

"I think there's a kid!" Rosie decided.

"A *what*?" Beth questioned once again.

"Are you *dense*, Beth?" Rose shouted in frustration. She heard another *thud* behind the tree and quickly dashed around it and found the kid leaning against a rock, wide eyed with blood running down from her nose. She had shoulder length curly brown hair and wore a tattered pink dress. Dirt caked her arms, legs, and face. She seemed to be sick, because she stopped trying to hide.

"Hey, hey, I'm not going to hurt you," Rosie said as the girl started to breathe heavier. Beth caught up and stood next to her and cursed.

"*Jesus* it's a kid." Rosie glared at her and mouthed *Language*. Marilyn finally found them and stood there, speechless. The girl's eyes glanced back and forth between all three girls, clearly anxious.

Rosie knelt down near her slowly. "We're not going to hurt you, we're your friends."

The girl stared up at her face and slowly repeated, "Friends."

"Yes, friends. We want to help you. Are you lost?"

After a second, she nodded her head. Marilyn leaned down next to Rosie and asked, "Did you lose your family?"

She nodded again.

"When? Where?"

"Long time," she whispered. "Bad place."

Shivers went down Rosie's spine and Marilyn turned towards her. "I don't think this girl's with the tours," Marilyn whispered.

"We don't know that, she could be disoriented, or sick," Rosie said. Marilyn contemplated this for a moment, and nodded in agreement.

"Can you stand?" Marilyn asked her. The girl didn't respond but instead stared blankly at her. "Can you stand if we help you?"

It seemed the girl thought about it for a second, and then decided, "Yes." Marilyn and Rosie held out their hands and the girl grabbed on, letting them pull her up. They kept supporting her until she was upright. Rosie let go and the girl seemed to sway. "Ok, here we go," Marilyn groaned as she hoisted her onto her back. The girl only had to be 13 or 14, but she was also very very small, and thin... almost too thin. She was no effort to carry at all.

"What are we going to do with her?" Beth asked as they walked back to the sidewalk.

"I'm not sure. We can keep her in my dorm... I live alone," Marilyn told them, "Remember?"

They explained what happened once they found Justin. "Shouldn't we call the police?" Justin asked quietly. At the mention of police, the young girl seemed to startle on Marilyn's back.

"No, we'll figure it out first. She needs rest. And food, probably."

They walked the rest of the way back, with the girl on Marilyn's back. They headed straight to her dorm, Raphael Hall. Fortunately, Marilyn's room was on the first floor, so they didn't have to climb any stairs.

Marilyn put the girl down and Rosie steadied her as Marilyn opened the door with her keys. They layed her down on the unused loft bed. Beth grabbed a box of tissues from Marilyn's desk and started dabbing at her nose.

"Are you ok?" She asked. The girl opened her eyes and gave a slight nod. "Okay... good."

"Are you hungry? Do you want food?" Marilyn asked her. She nodded again, more vigorously this time. Then she leaned her head back into the mattress and closed her eyes.

"Do I have food?" She asked Rosie from the side of the bed. Rose walked to the other side of the room and started rummaging through Marilyn's shelves. "Yes!" She exclaimed as she picked up a box of cereal. It was empty. "Um... no... Marilyn, you really need to clean out your stuff."

"I usually don't need to," Marilyn mumbled.

Rosie continued rummaging through the shelves until she saw a box of fruit gushers lying on it's side. She picked it up to find that there was one packet left. "There's some gushers!" She shouted.

"That'll work, kinda," Marilyn said. Rosie brought them over to Marilyn.

"I have some lean cuisines in my fridge, I can go get some," Justin

offered.

"Please," Marilyn said. This girl couldn't live on gushers.

"Ok, I'll be right back." Justin left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Rosie and Beth turned back to the girl on the bed. Marilyn was slowly feeding her gushers.

"So, um," Beth started, looking at the girl, "What's your name?"

Marilyn looked up at her with narrowed eyes, and said, "Beth I really don't think-

"Eleven," the girl said.

The girls all just looked at her, not quite understanding what she just said.

"El," she said, pointing at herself weakly, "My name is El."

"OK, El," Beth continued, "that's a nice name. My name's Beth. Well, it's actually Elizabeth. But we can't both be El." El seemed to enjoy the thought as she smiled a little bit.

"I'm Rosie." Rose said. Abruptly she added, "Rosalinda." Beth laughed a little bit and Rosie shot her daggers with her eyes.

"I'm Marilyn."

"Hi," El said to all of them.

"Um, El, do you know how you got here? Did you run away from something?" Beth continued. El furrowed her brows and she shook her head.

"It's... hard to explain." She eventually said.

"It's ok, we'll listen, if you want to talk about it," Marilyn said. El looked back at her, and asked, "You are my friends?"

"Yes. We're your friends," Marilyn agreed.

"I walked here... from Hawkins." She stated, pausing to close her eyes

and take a steady breath. "I went through a window, from the Upside Down."

"What's the Upside Down?" Rosie asked.

El turned towards her, searching for words. "Bad place. Bad... dimension."

Beth rose her eyebrows and looked at Rosie, "Man, this is getting a little too sci-fi for me."

"I'm not lying." El said loudly, starting to sit up a little bit. "Friends don't lie," she added, softer.

"Ok, I believe you," Marilyn told her, glancing up at Beth, who shrugged in defense.

There was knocking at the door, and Justin's voice called, "I've got the lean cuisines!" Rose left to open the door and Justin walked in and held up another backpack. He walked over to the desk and pulled out five different frozen boxes. "I don't know which one you want, so I brought a couple." El turned towards him and shrugged. So he picked up one and left to find the kitchen. Rosie followed him out the door.

"How's the little kid?" Justin asked as they got to the kitchen down the hall and he headed to the microwave.

"Her names El," Rosie started. "And, well, right now she's saying stuff like she came from different dimension."

"That's rich. She must be really sick," Justin said.

"I don't think she's that sick. She just seems injured, and scared." Justin slammed the microwave door and pressed a few buttons before starting to cook the lean cuisine.

"You think she's actually from another dimension?" He asked.

"I don't know," she started, "Maybe. I don't really think it matters."

"Rosie," Justin said, "You have to call the police. You can't just keep

her in Marilyn's room."

Rosie sighed, "I know, I know... we'll figure it out. I'm sure someone's looking for her. If she's still here by the end of spring break... I guess I'll talk to the others about calling someone about it."

The microwave beeped and Justin pulled out the dish. It was simply mac and cheese. He grabbed a fork and they began to walk back to the room. Right around the corner of the door, someone bumped heavily into Rosie, knocking her against the opposite door frame. Papers went flying. An upperclassmen, someone Rosie didn't really recognize but might have seen before, scrambled to pick them all up.

"Um, Sorry," Rosie said. He nodded his head as he stood back up and taped some of the posters up on the hallway walls quickly and haphazardly. He was gone in the next minute. Rosie watched him leave, and then turned to look at one of the posters.

"Missing: Anthony Sanders. Last seen in room 315 in the Old Chemistry Laboratories."

There was a photo of him, wearing a lab coat and goggles, with disheveled hair. In the picture he was holding a half full beaker. Under the picture were contact numbers.

Rosie didn't know what to do, so she ripped this one off the wall and ran to catch up with Justin.